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STEPS TOWARD ETHICAL MATURITY

by Richard J. Margolis

The study of ethics, an ever-green enterprise as old as the Tree of Knowledge, nicely illustrates a common dilemma in academia today: that of exposing students to the rigors of a useful discipline without at the same time quelling their original enthusiasm for the subject. At Ohio State University Bernard Rosen, a deft and nimble teacher of philosophy, has attempted to resolve the dilemma through an amalgam of ancient pedagogical practices and modern blandishments. Among other things, Rosen divided the class into small, twice-a-week sections where teaching assistants (TAs) get a chance to offer guidance and tender loving care; toned down his lecture style from swift and dramatic to patient and explanatory; and introduced a questionnaire at the start of the course that is designed to get students deeply and personally involved in the mysteries of ethics. The questionnaire is a crucial weapon in Rosen's well-stocked teaching arsenal; I shall return to it in a moment.

The evidence is spotty, but by and large these combined techniques appear to work. Moreover, they can be applied along a fairly broad front of academic course work, in particular wherever students are required to grapple with a set of difficult substantive ideas in order to sharpen their powers of critical thinking.

A successful lesson, if I read Rosen correctly, would end with the student's confessing to himself something similar to what Simmias confessed to Socrates

following a typically intense Socratic learning bout: "...I perceive that I was unconsciously talking nonsense." But because classes at Ohio State are rarely geared to Socratic intimacy—the Ethics course last fall attracted nearly 300 enrollees—Rosen has had to look for substitutes. The 10 small sections help, but they do not necessarily engage the students. The questionnaire, on the other hand, plunges them into the course material; it is baptism by philosophical fire.

The questionnaire invites each student to agree or disagree with a series of philosophically shaded assertions; from the answers a student can discover to which of many schools of philosophy he or she tends to subscribe. Rosen uses such questionnaires in all his courses—in Political Thought and Comparative Religion, to mention two others—and they occupy a special place in his teaching timetable. Students spend much of their course time acquiring the critical skills needed to assess their ethical beliefs as revealed through the questionnaire. In the final exam, a take-home paper, they are asked either to support their original position, or else, if they have changed their minds, to argue convincingly for another point of view.

Thus, if all goes well, the student absorbs a fair amount of theory, including a smattering from such master philosophers as Kant and Mill, in ways that relate directly to his own private opinions. He also becomes acquainted with some basic elements of logic—enough, presumably, to get him started on the task of tough-minded analysis. "The

key," says Rosen, "is to involve students in what is being taught. Filling out the questionnaire is just the first step in the process."

The 51 "questions" are not frivolous. They bear no resemblance to those quickie magazine quizzes that invite the reader to "Rate Your Sex Appeal" or measure "Your Emotional IQ." Here are some examples taken from the Ethics questionnaire, each a statement with which one can either agree or disagree. (A "can't answer" option is also available.)

1. The only thing that is *worth* pursuing is pleasure.

2. The things of value in our society should be distributed to those who can afford them as a result of their success in competing in our economic system.

3. What makes an action obligatory is that it leads to the greatest good for the greatest number; motives are irrelevant.

4. It may have been that slavery in the U.S. led to more good than bad overall, but it was still wrong to keep slaves.

5. The only motive anyone has in doing anything is to get something for himself. Even when you help others, it's only because it makes you feel good.

6. The only reason it is wrong for a drunken parent to beat a small child to death is that when I hear about it I feel bad.

7. Pleasure has a value independently of the things it may lead to, but so do other things such as friendship, freedom, and peace.

8. Our moral obligations are solely a function of what the majority of the

persons living in our society suppose are our moral obligations.

9. When you come right down to it, you can't ever really tell whether you are doing the right thing or not in a given situation.

If you agree with the first four assertions, you are probably a hedonistic free-enterpriser who holds both utilitarian and abolitionist principles—though, as questions 3 and 4 suggest, the two principles sometimes contradict each other. (Rosen tells his students they must learn to recognize their inconsistencies and deal with them!) If you endorse the fifth statement, then you may lean toward “psychological egoism,” a term Rosen felt compelled to use in order to account for a large body of student opinion. Earlier questionnaires, which failed to include statements about egoism, drew complaints from students. The omission, they told Rosen, forced them to choose from a set of equally unacceptable opinions.

It is characteristic of Rosen to shape theory to everyday reality. Some of his colleagues in the philosophy department have chafed him for making too much of egoism, an uncertified belief, as if there existed somewhere a philosophical Hall of Fame from which all but the most venerated ideas were barred. But Rosen argues that a teacher must begin where the student is, not where the student ought to be, and if the name of the game is egoism, then Rosen will make the most of it. As he notes in his soon to be published textbook, *Strategies of Normative Ethics* (Houghton-Mifflin), “Egoism is often the first view persons adopt when they consciously attempt to formulate an ethical theory. It is tempting to say the right thing to do is what increases my own good....”

It was Henry Adams who remarked that “what one knows in youth is of little moment; they know enough who know how to learn.” Rosen, in concurring with the latter half of Adams's comment, has in effect altered the first half to read: What one knows in youth is of great moment—to youth. The beauty of an idea is in the eye of the possessor.

Even so, both Rosen and the TAs encounter a fair amount of resistance from students who insist that it is possible, even preferable, to live one's life without subscribing to any clear-cut ethical opinions. “It's part of the romantic trend,” says Rosen. “Lots of kids hate to analyze; they would rather just ‘talk’ philosophy in a bull session than actually ‘do’ philosophy. My task is to engage

them in ethics—to convince them that they are as guilty as I am.”

One student wrote Rosen a stern note in which he defended philosophical waffling. “Perhaps,” he wrote, “I have a moral theory that all of the moral theories are somewhat right. In that case I'm not inconsistent at all, but just annoyed because you accuse everyone who was inconsistent of faulty judgment.” Rosen replied with a longish memo that he dis-

everyone I have talked to there (including Rosen) agrees that on stage he is a peerless performer. “But I've had to rein myself in,” he says. “I found I was entertaining them—making them laugh and making them cry—but they weren't learning.”

Nowadays Rosen, who gives three Ethics lectures a week, delivers his message in small, easily digested doses, with many pauses for questions and clarifica-

“In provoking his resistant students to examine whether the unexamined life is worth living, Rosen succeeds in the philosophical enterprise whatever their answers. His questionnaires elicit an investment with a reckoning due at the end of the term. Something of the student's own is now at stake.

But there is a sociological misconception: Although analysis may knock the edges off a simplistic view, it is wrong to claim that ‘[philosophical] analysis makes moderates of us all.’ The Socratic tradition of standing, against the state, in favor of immoderate positions is alive in philosophy departments around the world.

David Kaplan, University of California, Los Angeles

tributed to the class. In it he said, “One of the many foolish ‘consistencies’ someone can adopt is always to hold to an inconsistent pair of theories or claims. You may wish to suspend judgment or to give them all up...but when we understand what an inconsistency is, none of us wishes to continue to be burdened with it.”

Another form of resistance comes from students who expect to be told what to believe. “They are empty vessels,” says Rosen. “They want us to fill them with Truth.” It is a shock to many of these students to discover that the course is aimed less at truth than at its hot pursuit, and that the chase is paved with tricky and unfamiliar abstractions. Old, reliable student gambits, such as rote memorization and last-minute cram sessions, are of little use here; only thinking suffices.

Nevertheless, there are surprisingly few dropouts, and doubtless one of the reasons is Rosen's style of lecturing. An associate professor, Rosen has been teaching at Ohio State since 1963, and

tions. If his talk remains bright and good-humored, it is no longer dazzling. “I'm a patient man,” he says. “I try to remember how it feels to be a student—what it's like not to know.”

The lecture I attended one Wednesday noon in Sullivant auditorium was, students later assured me, reasonably representative of Rosen's style. He appeared onstage wearing a striped, open-neck shirt, baggy brown pants, and scuffed shoes. Standing there on the huge platform, peering alertly at the audience through horn-rimmed glasses, Rosen looked both small and amiable.

His opening remarks concerned the first assigned paper, a difficult exercise in ethical criticism of an intentionally absurd, male chauvinist proposition, to wit: “There is one and only one rule of moral obligation, and it is the following direct rule: *If any action results in a net gain of the number of males in relation to females, then that action is right.*” Students had gotten their papers back the day before, amid much grumbling and disappointment. Apparently they had not yet solved the intricacies of philosophical criticism, but Rosen chose to be reassuring. The papers, he said, were “promising.” The students had not been expected to see all the problems, and therefore they would not be graded on this first paper. “So,” he concluded, “things did not go badly.”

Rosen devoted the rest of the hour to utilitarianism, “a theory 22 percent of you are inclined to hold.” Using an over-

Learning experience:

Ethics. No prerequisites. Enrollment: 300.

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head projector to scribble his main points, Rosen drew a connection between utilitarianism and various theories of distributive justice. He pointed out, for example, that utilitarian modes tended to conflict with the pure form of communism, and he reminded students that more than half of them had endorsed communism in the questionnaire: "Things of value should be distributed to each individual according to need, and we should receive from each individual according to that person's abilities." "Can't you see the headline in the Columbus *Dispatch*?" asked Rosen. "Fifty-Two Percent of OSU Students Are Communists!"

On the whole that day the going was tough but not without headway. Rosen stopped eight times to solicit questions, and if some of the inquiries seemed rudimentary ("Are we talking about utilitarianism?"), others suggested the beginnings of understanding. Rosen remained at all times genial, proffering face-savers to students who were in over their heads ("Perhaps you'd like to think some more about that and see me later."), and passing out compliments whenever remotely appropriate ("You see very well what the game is."). Nobody talked to his neighbor; nobody yawned. Still, in such a big class, and in one presided over by such a strong personality, few students

seemed willing to call attention to themselves by asking questions or challenging Rosen. They preferred the safety of anonymity, a common sanctuary at big universities.

It is in the small TA sessions that reticent students get a chance to speak their minds. The day I visited Ed Turnbull's section, for instance, there was a good deal of discussion about President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon. Students in all sections had been asked the previous week to "state whether you think Ford did the right thing in pardoning Nixon," and to "present your reasons." It was another effort to involve students personally in the process of ethical study. Now, Turnbull took matters a step further by dividing his class into two groups—those who favored the pardon and those who opposed it—and requiring each to discuss how best it might defend its position. (Two out of every three in this particular section opposed the pardon; but in the overall class, I was told, the division was about even.)

The idea was for each group to try to anticipate the other's argument, to frame a suitable response, and then to anticipate the rebuttal, ad infinitum, or at least until the bell rang. Turnbull, a young graduate student with a dark moustache and a concerned look, shuttled between factions, coaching and

coaxing. Some of the dialog may be worth citing; it suggests both the gentleness of the process and also a certain pedagogical relentlessness which I take to be a hallmark of Ethics 130. At one point discussion among the antipardoners turned on an assertion that the pardon had "weakened respect for law and order."

Turnbull: Well, what would the other side say to that?

Student 1: They might say that the President is different. He's on a pedestal. He should be judged by different standards.

Turnbull: All right. How would you respond to that?

Student 2 (after a long group silence): The President should set an example.

Student 3: He swore to uphold the Constitution, and the Constitution says that all men are created equal.

(That wasn't exactly correct, but Turnbull let it pass.)

Turnbull: So?

Student 3: So the President is equal under the law.

Turnbull: Okay. But you haven't proved that the pardon is wrong—only that this particular line of argument is wrong. Let's try another....

Turnbull ended the session by urging students who felt they needed help to

Flexibility and Freedom in the Short Course

If part of a philosopher's job is to see the same phenomenon in different ways, then perhaps that explains why William Blizek questioned the usual practice of teaching a subject in 45 fifty-minute class sessions. He reasoned that philosophy might best be studied with fewer but more intense classes interspersed with periods of independent study to give students time to think things through. In the fall of 1970, he was given the go-ahead from his dean at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to teach his "short course"—one that would last a whole semester but have only 10 formal class meetings.

"What I wanted to do," he explains, "was combine the traditional modes of teaching—lecture, discussion, and independent study—so that the advantages of each would compensate for the shortcomings of the others." There are six weeks of reading and discussion, then six lectures over two weeks, then a six-week period during which each student works

on a paper with the professor's help.

The class meets twice early in the reading stage. At the first meeting the instructor explains the course. At the next meeting, students are divided into study groups of five or six students who work together through the semester. Groups meet as often as they like. "They can chew on material without the pressure of an instructor looking over their shoulders," Blizek says. "Students seem to gain confidence from the meetings."

The purpose of this phase is for students to become thoroughly familiar with the material so they can get the most out of the lectures and be well equipped to prepare their papers. They're given a textbook and a study guide of more than 200 short-answer and discussion questions.

Blizek likes to keep in touch with each group through one of its members to make sure things run smoothly. Reassignments to other groups are made when necessary, but group participation is not required; Blizek be-

lieves that while groups are helpful for most, some students work best on their own. The reading period ends with an exam, and Blizek goes over the material with each group beforehand.

Next are the six lectures, "where we put the pieces together," Blizek explains. "They're intended to serve as an example of the kind of investigation we expect students to do in their papers." For Philosophy of Justice, Blizek spent the first five lectures on John Rawls's theory of justice. For the sixth he brought in a colleague to criticize Rawls's ideas. While in some short courses the lectures have covered different topics, this method had interesting results. Blizek reports that "I'm always amazed during the sixth lecture at how well students know their stuff. They argue with the lecturer, passionately defending Rawls. They use what they've learned confidently."

In the third phase each student writes a 10-page paper analyzing the

call on him in his office. He not only repeated his office hours, he also gave out his home telephone number. "Lots of them need one-to-one instruction," he said to me later. "I just hope they call me." If Ohio State is a "diploma mill," some of its teachers grind exceeding fine.

It can be seen from all this that Rosen and his TAs rely heavily on the tried-and-true—on such traditional teaching virtues as patience, courtesy, and day-to-day doggedness. And the questionnaire, that novel enzyme in the academic mix, appears to create a new chemistry, or ambience, in which the student stands a better chance to learn. The payoff comes when and if the student changes—not his views, necessarily, but certainly his arguments and his way of examining ethical issues.

I did not see the final papers that students wrote for Ethics 130, in which they attempted to demonstrate their progress, but I did get a look at about 50 final essays written last spring for Rosen's course on Political Thought; and, because that course is taught along lines similar to those followed in Ethics—with students starting out by answering a questionnaire about their political beliefs—the papers were revealing. What they revealed, mainly, was a tendency toward pragmatism; or, better still, a drift toward a stronger sense of conse-

quences. In paper after paper students noted that their initial beliefs had turned out to be "impractical" or "unworkable." One student wrote that at the outset she had claimed the only purpose of government was to prevent civil unrest, and that all governments ought to be judged against that single standard. "I now see," she observed in her final paper, "that the putting down of civil unrest could be brought about in circumstances that I wouldn't want in my society." Similarly, a student who began by endorsing voter intelligence tests as a measure for enfranchisement ended by conceding that "I no longer find this solution acceptable."

True, these were not earthshaking transformations, but they were present in nearly all the essays I read, and they seemed to reflect genuine learning, a process that is less a great leap forward than it is a sequence of small, tentative steps toward the light. What these papers suggested to me was that the students' new familiarity with the tools and uses of critical thinking tended to encourage reconsideration of extreme positions. In the American context, at least, analysis makes moderates of us all. (These are my ideas, and possibly not Rosen's.)

So it may be that Rosen's courses are ways of speeding freshmen and sopho-

mores toward what we adults are pleased to call "intellectual maturity"—a state of mind that shrewdly examines the ideas set before it, and one that does not yield readily to foolish argument. Such rational heights are not easily attained; few of us, caught as we are in the swirl of ideas and events, manage to stay on top for very long. Yet in a society that depends for its strength upon free citizens who must be prepared to make difficult moral choices, the game of tough-minded analysis is definitely worth the candle.

As for the students, they have every reason to resist Rosen's assault on their romantic vision; for ethical criticism, like other disciplines, seems at first to narrow one's possibilities and to confine one's spirit. Most students would probably agree with Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who asked, "What have I to do with the laws of Nature, or with arithmetic, when all the time those laws and the formula that twice two make four do not meet with my acceptance?" It is only later, if ever, that students come to grasp the broader possibilities that derive from mastery of complex ideas, and to find therein the seeds of their own intellectual emancipation. Rosen's approach, it seems to me, takes this often painful process a step or two beyond the ordinary. ■

philosophical question of his choice and suggesting a solution and supporting arguments. Students may meet with the instructor as often as they think necessary. Blizek recommends a minimum of three conferences: to discuss the topic, check an outline, and go over a rough draft.

During spring and fall 1971, the psychology department studied the short course in comparison with a conventional one. They concluded that highly motivated people did best in the short course and were most satisfied with it, indicating that the method is probably most suitable for philosophy majors, honors classes, and graduate students. But the study also showed that students in general preferred the format and retained more information. Poorly motivated students weren't as successful, but, Blizek observes, "This should improve. The short course has been modified since the experiment and I think another evaluation would show more favorable results."

One of the merits of the format, Blizek believes, is that it leaves extra time that the instructor can devote to the course. "When a semester includes 45 lectures, some are for background, some are hastily prepared because the professor is concentrating on his research, and still others have been given every semester for 20 years. But in the short course students are so well prepared after the reading period that the lecturer can go into much more subtle and complex material."

The program has drawn a variety of reactions from faculty. "Most professors have been unwilling to try it," Blizek reports. "I get the impression they're threatened by a structure that deviates so from the usual, that they would feel guilty about a format that leaves them so much free time." He goes on to say that some instructors are not pleased with attitudes students display after a short course. "Students are expected to have a certain body of information and it's not

always acceptable for them to go beyond that, to press questions too far." On the other hand, some praise just this point: Another philosophy professor who taught Blizek's former students mentioned that they asked questions more freely, showed broader thinking, and were more prepared to delve deeply into issues.

Most students are delighted with the program. Some have complained that conventional courses are dull and slow in comparison, lacking the flexibility and freedom of the short course. "There's no question that the course draws well," Blizek says. "At first we had all of 25 students, and last time there were two sections of 35 each. The short course inspires the kind of thinking that leads to imaginative and creative philosophizing, and isn't that what we're here for?"
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